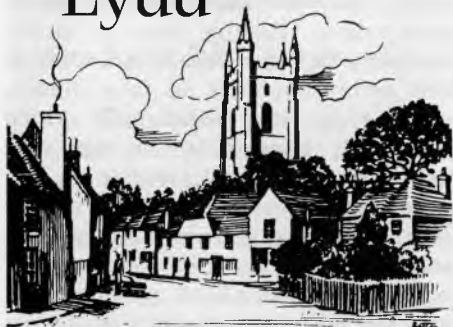


Walkabout Lydd



Wednesday 9th June 2004

reported by Sheila Cope

Fortunately the weather, bright and breezy after the suffocating heat of the previous day, was ideal for our trip, and we arrived at Lydd Town Museum to be welcomed with coffee and biscuits by its volunteer curators. No background muzak here. We were given an impromptu pianola demonstration on an instrument so treasured that only a few named experts may play it. It was fascinating to watch the felt hammers strike the chords at the behest of the pre-set roll although the pianola could be played as a normal piano.

Then we divided into three groups for our tour around the town which is a limb of the Cinque Port of New Romney and a member of the Confederation of the Cinque Ports. Our guide, a native of Lydd and a fervent advocate for the best interests of the town, could obviously visualise in her mind's eye all the people and events she described to us. Thus we shared the feelings of the lady who laboured over a drawn-thread work altar cloth only to have it rejected because it

was too small for the new altar, the publican's family who correctly suspected that their customers were German spies because they asked for apple cider one morning in perfect English and the owner of an historic cottage who would not allow experts to investigate it until eventually the roof was damaged in a gale. On a memorable occasion when the Queen Mother visited Lydd, Her Majesty had shared with our guide the method by which she maintained the stability of her hats; they were attached to a tightly fitting turban made of the same material.

At the Guildhall, now Town Hall, in the High Street, we were shown the mayoral chain, to which a link is added to record each mayor, and the jewel worn by the mayoress. The town mace is noteworthy because its head can be unscrewed to reveal inside a loving cup used on special occasions such as a Twinning ceremony. The participants stand back to back, each taking a sip as the cup is passed around.

The church of All Saints, known as the Cathedral of the Marsh because of its double doors and its size and visibility for miles around, was badly bombed during the last war and its altar and much of the roof destroyed. Fortunately fire watchers in the tower at the time were unharmed. Our guide pointed out names on the war memorial in the church, most of whose families are still resident in the town. The Archbishop of Canterbury's prediction that the church would never be rebuilt was proved wrong by the supreme efforts of the congregation. The church has many interesting features including an excellent organ and the remains of a lepers' window.

In New Street we were shown a former 16th century hall-house and one time market hall now sub-divided into 3 dwellings, and in Coronation Square,

much older and more interesting than its name suggests, the hardware shop with its 15th century Old Court Hall above. Incidentally the hardware shop itself is fascinating, the type of business now supplanted by B&Q and Homebase and much regretted once lost.

The original staircase of the Court Hall is too precarious for public use. Apparently the room's former purpose was discovered by accident and no attempt has been made at restoration. It is about 5 metres square and contains the magistrate's chair together with artefacts collected by the owners interspersed with old items of stock from the shop below. 'Eclectic' might be the modern word to describe it, 'hotch-potch' a more old fashioned one, but neither would do justice. It seems as genuine a piece of history as you would find, just left as it is. We were shown the Rype, still the largest village green in Kent and now jealously guarded against encroachment, but once a much larger area given to Lydd for the common use of its townspeople.

After our tour we returned to the Museum to explore it further. It contains 'the 1890 Merryweather Fire Engine, c1900 Horse bus, 1928 Landau used on Club Day (and for weddings) and a unique Beach Cart used for carrying beer etc from Finns Brewery across the shingle to Dungeness'.

The Museum is housed in the Old Fire Station, originally built because the nearest ones were at Rye or Ashford, and manned when required by nearby residents. The Museum is similarly maintained by amateurs in the best sense; words such as theme park and experience are irrelevant here. Crowded and as orderly as possible in limited space are displayed the actual tools used in the trades and activities including smuggling which supported Lydd's economy. There

are implements used by the blacksmith before his forge was quite recently dismantled, and the barrel in which fishing nets were daily soaked in special preservative. Fishing was a family business which took place from the beach. Nets were supported on large frames standing up like windbreaks which presumably trapped fish at high tide. Some exhibits were familiar to us, however, and remarks such as 'My mother used one of these' (gofering iron) could be heard. A visit to Lydd Museum is recommended, details of opening times available from the New Romney tourist office.

In addition to sheep farming, brewing was an important industry. Ginger beer was made too but the market collapsed when American prohibition ended. There appeared very little social stigma attached to smuggling. We had been shown terraced cottages with their connecting roofs which provided smugglers' runs. The family of French impressionist painter Alfred Sisley came from Lydd and our guide told us that his father, who moved to France, was a business man by day and a smuggler by night.

Lunch was pre-booked at the nearby Moon & Stars, a small restaurant where the friendly proprietors filled us to the brim so that at least one of our party succumbed to sleep on the homeward journey. This type of trip is very suitable for a Society member on his or her own and who does not know many people. The group tour and shared meal bring us all together.

Our thanks are due to the Friends of Lydd and their dedication to their Museum and willingness to give up their time to show us their town. Above all, how lucky we are to have Joan Liggett with her talent for organisation and great sense of humour.